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GOD—INTERPRETED BY FATHERHOOD.

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IN the childhood of the race the nature of the Deity was inferred from the manifestations of energy in the universe. Whatever produced instant and most intense terror was personified and supposed to be the mightiest of beings. Hence the first idea of the supreme Power (after that revealed through the family) was derived from winds, storms, earthquakes; from the sun, moon, and stars; from day and night, from sea and sky. Since the manifestations of force were many, and the fact of unity had not yet been discovered, belief in many gods naturally followed. They were interpreted by the effects which were produced on observers by natural phenomena. There was the god of the day and night, of the storm and the sea. The idea of unity succeeded, but there was no change in the method of interpretation. Nature was nearest to man; nature was vaster than man—therefore nature was worshiped, and men were awed by her storms and made glad by her splendors. But nature had many forms and moods, and no man could appreciate more than one of them at a time. Consequently belief in many gods, some friendly and some hostile, became common. But these many deities were themselves dependent on some primal power, called Fate, or by some other name. Gradually this method of reasoning gave place to another. The evolution of government forced itself into prominence, and without any distinctly marked period of transition the interpretation of the unseen power, or powers, by the energies of the universe gave place to one derived from governmental analogies. Then men began to think of the Deity as imaged in the institutions to which they were most directly responsible. Thus the universe came to be regarded as a huge kingdom or empire, of which God was the ruler, a king—awful and majestic, as became the monarch of such a realm.

Slowly these theories were supplanted by another which is the fruit of the scientific investigation of later times. A study of the things which are certified by the senses leads to the perception of unity, not as something demonstrable, but as something required by facts. No microscope is fine enough to detect a spirit in man or in the universe, and yet the presence of something mysterious and spiritual is almost universally acknowledged. Energy, wisdom, intelligence are believed to be omnipresent, but how they coexist is not known. We feel the pressure of the facts of life and history; we hear the voices that speak in the spaces and in the silences, but the message which they would communicate is indefinite and indistinct. And so we are told that the universe implies that the unknown and unknowable principle of unity is the Deity—if there be one. But when we ask, Does unity imply personality? no answer is forthcoming.

Among Christians a new reply is having wide acceptance. To trace the genesis of the school of thought to which I refer is difficult and not essential to my object; but one thing is evident—whether liberal or conservative, evangelical or Ritschlian, it is devotedly Christian. Two teachers more clearly than others whom I know in our time have given form to this answer—Herrmann, of Marburg, and Fairbairn, of Oxford.

Herrmann says: "The person of Jesus is the fact by which God communes with us."¹ When we know the person of Jesus, we know God, but we can know the person of Jesus only as we know his inner life. "Jesus becomes a real power to us when he reveals his inner life to us."² "We, for our part, become conscious of God's communion with us by the fact that the person of Jesus reveals itself to us through the power of his inner life."³ "But his (the preacher's) chief aim should be to make visible and active that which alone can be the basis of faith in himself as well as in others. . . . Jesus only, the *inner life* of this man."⁴ Thus Herrmann teaches that the only way to become acquainted with God is to know or realize the inner life

¹ *Communion of the Christian with God*, p. 56.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

of Jesus, and the only way to do that is by experience. That this is one way of knowing God all Christian thinkers will readily grant, but that it is the only one, or either the simplest or most elemental, I cannot acknowledge. God has spoken through many voices, and the revelation which began when Jesus was born was not the first, nor will it be the last. "The heavens declare the glory of God."

"The interpretation of God in the terms of the consciousness of Christ may thus be described as the distinctive and differentiating doctrine of the Christian religion."⁵ The answers of Herrmann and Fairbairn are essentially the same: to know the nature of God one must know the inner life, or the consciousness, of Christ. But that is not easy. To know the inner life—to see into the consciousness—of any man is no simple task; thus to penetrate into the "inner life" of Jesus Christ, whom none now living ever saw, is a process, to say the least, exceedingly difficult. It would require careful definition and explanation. Who could know whether he was experiencing the inner life of the Christ without first knowing that life? And yet, to know it, we are told, requires experience. Thus we are started on a fatal circle of inquiry. Again, how are we to interpret in the terms of the consciousness of Christ? How may the possession of that consciousness be verified except by that consciousness itself? While they are not satisfactory, these answers contain much truth. He who has entered into the consciousness of Christ does know God. As a means of interpreting the divine nature this teaching is altogether inadequate. How should the subject be approached? Is not the answer of the Bible sufficient? Yes, when it is understood, but there is wide difference of opinion as to what the Bible really teaches. Moreover, with those who do not recognize the authority of the Christian Scriptures this reply would have no force. The Scriptures throw light on the subject; but they also must be interpreted.

All forms of idealism have answers to our question, but there is no means of testing their accuracy except by what is resident in the mind that speculates. The harmony between the imagi-

⁵ FAIRBAIRN'S *Place of Christ in Modern Theology*, p. 388.

nation and its own product is the only standard of measurement which pure idealism possesses.

Another method of arriving at an answer to our inquiry as to the nature of the Deity is the inductive. From a study of the seen we rise to the unseen. From what the world and man are we infer what God is. But does not this reasoning lead to confusion? Are not the processes of history and the forces and activities of the universe double-faced? The light speaks of love; the darkness of gloom. The landscape, with its flowers and the songs of birds, suggests one kind of a being; storms, tidal waves, and earthquakes, with their wake of destruction and death, suggest an altogether different being. The European would have one conception of God, the African another. Environment modifies the mental concepts as well as the physical features. There is only one way to escape the force of this reasoning. We must find that which is most elemental in the life of man, and in it seek an answer to our inquiry concerning the nature of God. In order of time the first human relation, and the one which makes itself felt to the intelligence before anything else, is parenthood. Before a child thinks of storms or sunset splendors he looks into the depths of loving eyes; before he dreads clouds and darkness he shrinks from a frown on his parent's face. The first and most elemental of relationships, the nearest and most influential of all factors in the human environment, is covered by the word fatherhood, which really contains all that is signified by the word parenthood. From it are learned the earliest lessons of dependence, authority, responsibility, ministry. In short, all the God that a little child knows is embodied in his parents, and the larger vision of his later years is but the growth and expansion of what is made known through them. Everyone has a real, though perhaps dim, understanding of what fatherhood means. It is not only the primary, it is also the most universal, of human conceptions of the higher powers. Those who have experienced the inner life of Christ surely know God, but that experience is complex and not easily interpreted. Is there no natural way to reach that knowledge for those who have not had such an experience? Our answer is this: The

vehicle by which the first intimations of the essential Deity are conveyed, if it is universal, must always be trustworthy. Those earliest intimations come through parenthood; therefore its voice is the most authoritative concerning the nature of God. Whatever that nature is, it is made known by fatherhood in proportion as it approaches what is commonly regarded as its ideal form. What reveals God once must always do so, although the contents of the revelation may broaden and deepen with years and experience. Thus we are prepared by what we know of man to find the holiest of human relations used as the medium of the most authoritative divine revelation. Instead, therefore, of saying that the nature of the Deity is disclosed only in the experience of the inner life of the historic Christ, I should say that it is always and everywhere revealed in fatherhood, and that the revelation approaches perfection in proportion as the father is worthy of the sacred name which he bears. Because the first idea of God always comes through the parent, we infer that ideal fatherhood is always a true revelation of the divine. Herrmann says, to know God, one must experience the inner life of Christ. But only a few do that—and men must know something of what God is before they can be expected either to fear or love him. All men through fatherhood receive their first lessons concerning God. Therefore, we say: In what your own heart tells you every father was intended to be multiplied by infinity, behold as clear a manifestation of the contents of the word God as can be conveyed to man.

But let us now inquire what is implied in fatherhood. The first thought is clearly that of identity of nature between two beings. The child and his parent are two personalities, and yet, what the father is the child is. The second inherits the peculiarities, the temperament, the characteristics, the tendencies, of the one from whom his being is derived. There is a vital connection between them. They are of the same substance and have the same nature, and yet they are two. The branch is not the vine, and yet it is the extension of the vine. The parental relation, when used to interpret God, necessitates the inference that man is of the very nature or substance of the Deity, and

yet that he is not Deity—as I am of the nature of my father, but am not my father. Identity of nature between parent and child is essential to the idea of fatherhood.

Mutual responsibility is also a part of the content of the revelation of fatherhood. By a kind of instinct the child feels his dependence and his responsibility. No formal rules compel a child to bow to the will of the parent; to do so is as natural and instinctive as for him to breathe. The feeling of responsibility in the child is manifest from the dawn of consciousness. Later we begin to understand that our parents are as truly responsible *for us* as that we are responsible *to them*. They determined our birth; in large part they made the environment into which we were born; in a certain real sense they are our creators. But for them we would never have been. Therefore they have duties to us which are evident, and which usually are joyfully acknowledged and assumed. We render to them loyal obedience—they give to us loving service; and no fidelity on the one side can in the least discharge the obligation which belongs to the other side. The child and the parent have mutual responsibilities. The same is true in the higher relation between man and the unseen power whom we call God. On the one hand worship and obedience are as instinctive as breathing and eating, and the obligation to obey is universal and apparently ineradicable. On the other hand, with the growth of years, the conviction is developed that he who allowed us to exist, who determined our heritage and our associations, has himself an obligation to us as real as ours to him. By every consideration of righteousness and justice, he is bound to seek to make existence for his creatures a blessing and not a curse.

Every child in every true home is born into an atmosphere of love. This is so much a matter of course that at first it is hardly appreciated. Childhood is the manifestation of love. A little child is at once the simplest and the profoundest example of what love requires and what it inspires. Even before reason is able to make an inference, love begins its unconscious ministries, and it never ceases; for even when death separates bodies, memory binds spirits in bonds which are deathless. Love also is

mutual. "We love him because he first loved us," is forever true. The parent pours his heart-wealth around his child; the child, almost before consciousness dawns, begins to return love with love. Thus the divinest fact of which we know is forever coming into new forms of manifestation. Fatherhood thrills with love; childhood responds to the appeal of love with love. And so the eternal poem is being written in terms of life, and loses none of its music as the years go by. To a child the divinest being known is his father, who shares his nature, yet whom he feels is above him. When we first approach the Unseen on whom we feel ourselves dependent, it is natural and inevitable to believe him to be like the one on whom we evidently depend, and to whom we already feel that we are responsible; and that reasoning leads straight to fatherhood, and therefore to love, which is without limit or bound and immortal.

Thus a study of the most nearly universal and elemental of human relations justifies the conviction that all men are of the same substance as the One who gave them being; that they are responsible to him and he to them; that he loves as naturally as the sun shines, and wins love as naturally as the gardens respond to the light.

Does the conclusion we have now reached harmonize with the teaching of Scripture? The harmony is complete. In the New Testament the name father is applied to Deity (chiefly by Jesus) 256 times. No other name has such frequent use. The only other often mentioned is God, and that on the lips of Jesus is usually associated with Father. In the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded by Matthew, "Father" appears seventeen times, and with almost equal frequency in other parts of the gospel. In Mark the name appears four times. In Luke's gospel, again, the word is often used; while it shines from every page of the gospel of John. In the Acts and the epistles "Father" does not so frequently appear. The very thought of God in the writings of Paul was overshadowed by his immense enthusiasm for Christ. He is so possessed by Christ that he seldom attempts to interpret God in any other term, but when the word Father is

used by him, it is in a peculiarly emphatic sense. In Rom. 15:6 he speaks of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ;" in 1 Cor. 8:6, in a significant passage, he uses the word as a term of definition, "One God, the Father;" in 2 Cor. 1:3 he writes "the Father of mercies;" in Eph. 1:17, "the Father of glory;" 4:6, "God and Father;" 5:20, "God, even the Father." The salutations in the Pauline epistles all refer to "Father," and the reference in those instances surely is general. In the membership of the early churches were many who could be called Christians only by courtesy, like the incestuous man at Corinth; but they were all included in the salutation. In the epistle to the Hebrews there are but two references to the "Father," and the epistle of James contains the word but twice. Peter uses it four times, and always in a general sense. When once more the writings of John are reached, the name emerges as prominent as before. In the epistles of John, "Father" has no limited meaning as if intended to apply only to a few. It is as wide as humanity. In 1 John 2:1 we read of the "Advocate with the Father." Advocate may be the possession of those who believe, but Father is a universal name. In the Revelation the word appears five times. A comparative study of the preceding references is instructive. Father is almost the only word used by Jesus when speaking of the Deity; it is almost the only word found in those books which contain an account of his life and teachings. Its use is equally frequent and characteristic by the apostle who is nearest to him and who best knew his mind. In the books most Christian it is found most frequently, while in those most colored by Judaism it seldom appears. James was the Jew among the New Testament writers, and in his letter the name is found but twice. The gospel of John is peculiarly the gospel of Fatherhood. That was written latest of all the books of the New Testament, and if John knew much of the writings of the other apostles, it is not an unwarranted inference that his peculiar and reiterated emphasis may have been intentional, in view of the fact that fatherhood did not have the place to which it was entitled in what may be called the Judaic epistles. Whether this hypothesis be correct or not, the fact that the idea

and name of Father dominate all the gospels, and the epistles of John, is beyond question.

But we are met with the assertion that, while the name Father is often applied to the Deity, he is represented in the New Testament as the Father of believers only. This may be answered in two ways. The essence of fatherhood is the giving of life. If all men owe their being to God, then he is their Father, and has upon him the responsibilities of fatherhood. But a careful examination of the circumstances attending the use of the word Father shows that it will allow no such narrow interpretation. The Sermon on the Mount may have been addressed to the disciples only, or to the multitude—that matters little. The disciples were not good enough at that time to be the especial favorites of the Almighty. There were quite as choice spirits outside that band as within it. James and John, who, even under the shadow of the cross, were to seek the rich offices in the kingdom; Peter, who was to deny him; and Judas, who was to betray him, were all alike taught to pray, "Our Father, which art in heaven." The nearest definition of God to which Paul ever came was, "One God, the Father." Because a Christian today speaks of "the Father," or "our Father," it does not follow that he means to be understood that he is the Father of Christians alone; and when the New Testament writers use the word, it has the largest meaning. It is not surprising that the epistles are less clear at this point than the gospels, for the former tell us concerning him of whom the apostles thought most, namely, the Master, Christ; while the gospels tell us of whom Jesus thought and talked most, namely, God the Father.

But the frequency with which the word Father appears is not so significant as the relations in which it appears. In the only form in which the doctrine of the Trinity has any expression "Father" always has the first place; baptism was always to be first in the name of the "Father;" when Jesus taught men to pray, it was to the "Father;" when he taught the doctrine of Providence, he said, "Your heavenly Father feedeth them;" when he taught the nature of God in the parable of the Prodi-

gal Son, he showed the Father in an act of forgiveness; when he unrolled the panorama of the judgment, he showed the Father in the midst of its terrors; when he first declared himself the Messiah, he spoke of the Father to a Samaritan women three times; the promise is that the Comforter shall come from the Father; the Advocate is with the Father; death is robbed of its sting when Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions;" and Paul declares that when Christ at last shall give up his kingdom it will be into the Father's hands. Thus nearly all, if not all, the teaching in the New Testament which is most vital and fundamental is stated in terms of fatherhood. The reason for this is not far to find. The words "king" and "emperor" had horrible and cruel associations. The former suggested Herod, and the latter Cæsar, and both were hateful. The word God is meaningless; it suggests the infinite and everlasting, the nebulous and awful, but sheds no light on essential being. Jesus might have used any other word as well as God, for it only points toward the unknown. But the meaning of Father all understood then, and will forever understand. Its significance is as rich and evident to the peasant as to the philosopher. No other name at once so accurate and so easily comprehended, so simple, and yet so profoundly significant, could have been selected. If we may so speak, it is the natural and elemental name for the Deity. It is not easily misinterpreted when the human relationship even remotely suggests its ideal significance.

When fatherhood is associated with the Deity, it fittingly assumes the phrase of the Apostles' Creed, "God, the Father Almighty." Then it is no common or small word. It expresses more than sentiment. In its most limited meaning it implies the austere as well as the tender, the just as well as the loving. In this its largest use these qualities of being are expanded to infinity. At the heart of the universe, transcending it and yet pervading it, directing the affairs of men, and equally the sweep of the constellations; the governing principle of human history, and also of the cosmic energies in all the ages, is the essence of fatherhood, infinite, all-embracing, everlasting

—this is the truth bound up in that phrase, “the Father Almighty.”

The ideal fatherhood necessitates the attribute of holiness. When Jesus said, “Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” he asserted the absolute holiness of the Father. Holiness is as essential to fatherhood as is love. A true father is as anxious to save his child from being wrong as from suffering. Justice and love are only opposite sides of the same attribute; they cannot be separated. Wrong and error put as heavy a burden on fatherhood as do sorrow and pain. The earthly father can long allow in his household where its presence may contaminate nothing which is evil or unjust without being untrue to himself; if it is tolerated at all, it will be only in order that it may be so removed as to cause the least friction; but go it must, and as soon as is consistent with all the interests which should be conserved. However its existence may be accounted for, the Almighty Father, because of his holiness, can permit sin and suffering only so long as may be necessary to accomplish the best purposes for the universe. As to when those purposes will be achieved, and by what methods holiness will be victorious, we may speculate, but with our present vision we may not know. The central and controlling motive in fatherhood is love—and love in proportion to its perfection is mixed with holiness. Fatherhood is always ethical as well as emotional. Omnipotence, holiness, love are three words which are bound together in any adequate description of the Heavenly Father.

The full content and significance of the Divine Fatherhood can be but dimly comprehended. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us. “Now we see through a glass darkly.” But this truth points toward an interpretation of the life of the individual, of the universe, of history, which is of inconceivable glory. It implies perfect holiness and perfect love in the hands of Omnipotence. The Father is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore all the ages and all the events of the past have been directed by love toward holiness; therefore no creature has ever been outside the reach of his love or the sweep of

his holiness; therefore not only this world, but all worlds have been administered by love in the interests of holiness; therefore the one far-off divine event must be the sway of holiness in every creature and in every part of the universe.

But many objections are raised against these conclusions. All that has been said is acknowledged to be true, but it is claimed that the induction is incomplete. We are reminded that if the contents of fatherhood are to be learned from the human relationship, the fact can hardly be evaded that in the majority of homes fatherhood is not associated with holiness, and implies instinctive rather than intelligent and rational love. That is true. In humanity fatherhood is perhaps quite as often an accident as the result of choice. How can such grim facts be evaded? and, much more, how can they be explained? Moreover, there is another side to nature and history than the one thus far presented. Even if love and justice do dominate the household, by what fiction can they be said to rule in society? The state punishes the weak and unfortunate as if they were responsible for the acts for which they suffer. What element of justice is exhibited when a poor, frail woman who, in a fit of shame and desperation, has smothered a new-born child, is brought to punishment for what she would never have done if she had been in the circumstances of those who pass judgment? The violence in nature; the calamities which destroy thousands of lives in a moment; the pestilence; and, perhaps most of all, the principle of murder, by which man and beast alike are "red in tooth and claw"—how can these incontestable and terrible realities be reconciled with fatherhood at the heart of things? I do not at this time attempt to answer these questions, but I do not ignore them. They cannot be evaded; but whether they may be adequately answered is an altogether different question. This much at least may be said at this time: Neglect, cruelty, accidental fatherhood are not essential and elemental in the idea of fatherhood. Among the most barbaric peoples are found rudiments of holiness and love which, if they have opportunity, always grow and become sovereign. Even where these qualities are not found, they are recognized as essential to the true conception

of fatherhood. Ideals alone are prophetic of what ought to be and will be. The ideals of savages are often right when knowledge and ability to realize them are defective. A study of civilized and also of the less perfectly developed races shows that even among them, before natural phenomena inspire awe and worship, the sanctity of fatherhood is felt; that it is the nearest, the most elemental, and the most constant factor in the life of the child; that from it the first ideas of Deity are derived; that essential to it is a realization that parent and child have the same nature, although they are not identically the same beings, and that the feeling of dependence and responsibility on the part of the child is quickly followed by one of obligation on the part of the parent, because he is the author of the existence of his child. Thus we believe that men and God are the same in substance, though not identical as individuals; that they have reciprocal obligations—the one of obedience, and the other of service. So much results from a study of fatherhood in human life. These conclusions harmonize with the teaching of Jesus. Almost the only name he ever used when speaking of God was Father. Fatherhood, when applied to God, must signify the same that it does in human relations, or the word is meaningless. But while it signifies the same in both spheres, in the former its contents are multiplied by the distance between the finite and imperfect and the infinite and perfect. The perfect being must be perfectly holy and loving. In the human conception of fatherhood we have the clearest idea of Deity which it is possible for man to understand. As we better appreciate the prophecies of our own nature, we shall have a worthier conception of the grandeur and compassion, the holiness and love, of Him whose perfection may be forever approached, but never can be fully comprehended. It is easier and safer to try to understand the meaning and prophecy of fatherhood than to seek to experience the inner life of Jesus. The key which he used to unlock the most majestic of mysteries is the one which he would have his followers use.

My conclusion, then, is as follows: We may know God in his essential nature—what he is apart from the fact that he is—

by a realization of what is meant by the relation between parent and child. This knowledge is within the reach of all, since all are children or parents, or both. In short, the one phrase which may be fearlessly, constantly, and universally used is : Interpret God by fatherhood. The nearest and most elemental relation in humanity may be trusted when through it come revelations of the nature of Deity. This is the Christian method of investigation, because it was the one followed and sanctioned by the Christ. His message harmonizes with the results of a study of human life, and both emphasize what I believe should be the governing principle in all theology—interpret God by fatherhood.



THE HEAD OF ST. JOHN—RAPHAEL